

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

A Personal Essay for Jewish Heritage Month

By Eric Galton



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Pruzana City, where Eric's grandparents are from



"You will never go to church.
You are Jewish."

"What's Jewish?"
I responded.

Eric as a child with his father

One of my early childhood memories is walking with my father through the Nativity scene at the Catholic church across from our apartments in Plainfield, New Jersey. I loved the animals, the smell of the straw, and this little, sweet baby all bundled up in a basket -- although I had no idea who he was.

We walked over to the playground, and my dad started pushing me on the swing. As I had done for the three years before, I asked my father when we were going to go to church. On this particular afternoon, my dad finally answered the question and said:

"You will never go to church. You are Jewish."

"What's Jewish?" I responded .

I was eight years old. Two weeks later, I was enrolled in Hebrew School. Thus began my journey as an American Jew and the unraveling of the tragic history of my family.

Growing up Jewish

As a young boy, I didn't know hate or prejudice. I lived in a diverse, working-class neighborhood. I had a Jewish mother, a Catholic mother, a Black mother, an Italian mother, and my friends and I were more than welcome in each other's homes. We played ball in the street from dawn to dusk and shot hoops in the park. But, as with all things, my childhood innocence quickly faded.

Racial and ethnic slurs were endemic in my teenage years. Blacks and Jews were not allowed to join the country club. On team bus rides to games, my teammates would pass the time by hurling epithets at each other. For a good while, I wasn't identified as Jewish. I didn't have a "Jewish" name, and I did not look stereotypically Jewish. Yet somehow, the cat got out of the bag.

In ninth grade, I was captain of our JV baseball team. We had a scrimmage with the Varsity team; I hit two triples, and we won the game. Afterward, I was assigned to pick up the bases. As I was putting them in the bag, six members of the Varsity team ran up behind me, knocked me to the ground, and started kicking and beating me, using every terrible Jewish epithet you could imagine. I laid on the ground for fifteen minutes after they left, determined not to show them they had hurt me as I walked into the locker room later.

I never forgot that feeling of powerlessness and what it means to be victimized just because of who and what you are.

Ultimately, I became captain of the Varsity team. I was never going to let that happen again, but I never forgot that feeling of powerlessness and what it means to be victimized just because of who and what you are.

Unearthing my identity

Once, when I was seventeen and my brother was twelve, my parents left us alone for a weekend. Because there were always so many secrets in my family, my brother and I had concluded -- for no good reason -- that we were adopted. My dad kept a metal strongbox in the basement where we thought our birth certificates might be hidden. So, we broke into it.

We were right about the birth certificates being stowed away in there, but wrong about being adopted. Still, there were a number of surprises in that box. First, our dad was not born in this country, and second, his last name was not Galton, like ours, but Goldstein, born in Poland.

So how and why did I become Eric Galton?

When our parents came home, we had the evidence sitting open on the kitchen table. And my father -- a tall, strong, brilliant man -- began to weep.



Eric as a child with his mother

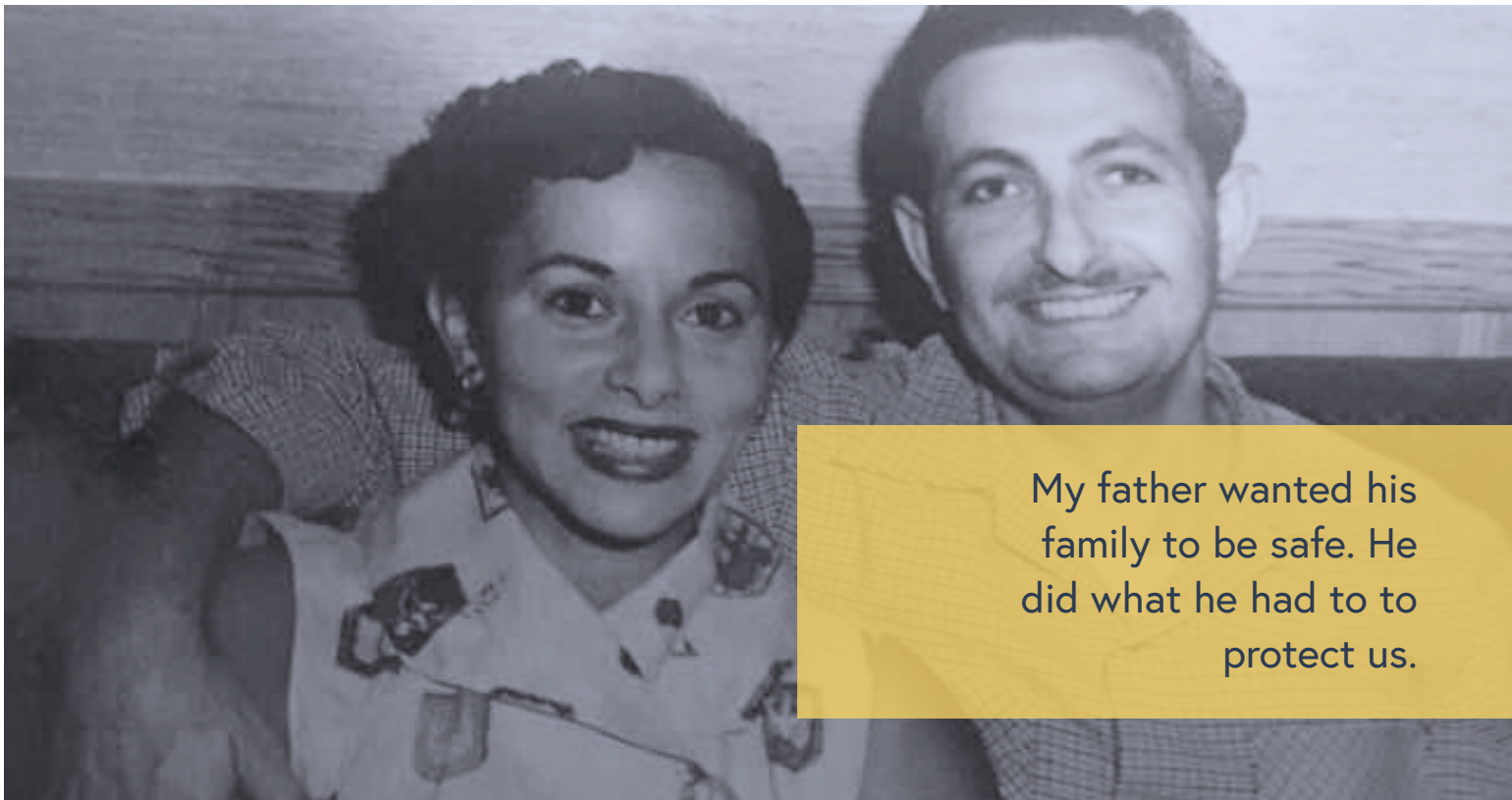
What I learned

My dad, his brother, sister, mom, and dad were among the 20% of the Goldstein and Kaplan families who managed to escape the Holocaust. The remainder of those families -- our families -- were murdered in concentration camps. My father had terrible memories of going into the basement of their home in Poland to hide from the Poles as they ransacked houses in the Jewish section of his town.

My dad's family, poor and not speaking English at first, somehow survived for many years. But his father, emotionally broken by so much loss, eventually abandoned his family, and his mother died in the waiting room of a New York City hospital, waiting to be seen for what turned out to be a burst appendix. My father, with no money for college, enlisted in the United States Air Force and served honorably for six years.

When he got out of the service, he married my mother and landed his first job in, of all places, Pine Bluff, Arkansas in 1949. He had a wonderful boss who told him that, with a last name like his, he would never be accepted in the business community. So, he and my mother found a book of names, turned to the ones that started with G, and in 1950, my dad changed his last name from Goldstein to Galton. I was born in 1952.

With reflection now, I can only imagine what my father went through to reach that point -- coming to a strange country, losing his relatives, being poor, and losing his mother at an early age. And then, to proudly serve your country only to be told that, to succeed in America, he needed to change his name and conceal his identity. My father wanted his family to be safe. He did what he had to to protect us.



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Eric's Parents, Anne and Paul Galton

My family and the Holocaust

I am still in the process of reconciling all of this. My Aunt Rose -- an Auschwitz survivor who has endured so many horrors and who is still alive -- inspires me. I am not certain I could muster the same courage that she found and grew to survive the beatings and the horrors of Auschwitz. Aunt Rose survived because she was young, physically fit, tall, and wiry. The Nazis knew they could put her and her sister, who was also imprisoned there, to work.

Aunt Rose also had an unshakable will to live and to survive. Her will to live was never more evident than during the pre-dawn hours when she was liberated from Auschwitz. As she tells it, the Nazis knew the Russians were about to liberate the camp. So, they tried to eliminate the evidence of what they'd done and who they'd done it to: any prisoner who could walk would be allowed to leave, but those who couldn't were shot and buried in shallow graves.

Aunt Rose and her sister began their march to freedom. It was still dark when they started walking. Shortly after, Aunt Rose's sister tripped on a rock, broke her ankle, and fell to the ground. Aunt Rose picked her up, threw her sister over her shoulder like a sack of potatoes, and carried her for two miles until they encountered and were rescued by friendly forces.

And yet, Aunt Rose had an optimistic hope and belief in the better angels of humanity. Despite the unspeakable acts she witnessed, Aunt Rose kept her faith that human beings could someday defeat the evils of hate, prejudice, and bias. Every time I visited my Aunt Rose, she would tell me "Eric, every day is a good day. Be kind, and smile."



To hear a first-hand account from Aunt Rose on what it was like to survive Auschwitz, [click here.](#)

Eric's Aunt Rose

Stepping into light

I hired a genealogist to trace my family. She found the ship manifests from my father's family's journey to the United States, and something else that was interesting: a portion of the Kaplan family has survived! I have relatives in Cordoba, Argentina and Montreal, Canada -- most of them physicians. And, fittingly, some survivors now live in Tel Aviv. I am in touch with all of them and will make my first visit to Israel next year.

For me, their existence means that Hitler failed. Somehow, we managed both to survive and find each other.

Now, I light the Sabbath candles every Friday and say a silent prayer for my families around the world and for any family who has ever been victimized simply because of who or what they are, or how they were born. As Aunt Rose said, be all things kind.

And, I am no longer hiding in plain sight. My real name is Eric Goldstein.



Eric at a synagogue in Budapest



The Great Synagogue in Budapest

To learn more about Jewish Heritage Month, visit the resources below.

1. <https://www.jewishheritagemonth.gov/> for featured exhibits and collections, resources for teachers, and general information about Jewish Heritage Month.
2. <https://www.archives.gov/news/topics/jewish-american-heritage> for selected videos, articles, blogs, and records.
3. <https://jwa.org/exhibits/dc> to learn about the stories of nine Washington, DC women -- their childhood homes, their personal struggles, and their transformative careers.
4. <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/commemorative-observations/jewish-heritage.php> for Legislative and Executive Branch materials dictating May as Jewish Heritage Month.
5. <http://americanjewisharchives.org/collections/> for manuscripts, photographs, microfilms, media, nearprint, and conversion certificates.
6. <https://www.adl.org/education/resources/tools-and-strategies/jewish-american-heritage-month-resources> for children's books and curricula related to Jewish Heritage Month.
7. <https://www.isjl.org/heritage-month.html> for fun facts as well as suggested activities, reading, and resources.
8. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/jewish-american-heritage-month.htm> for highlighted properties such as Sons of Israel Synagogue or Park Circle Historic District.

About Eric Galton

Eric Galton, a licensed attorney in Texas, is the Co-owner of Lakeside Mediation Center. He has been a full-time mediator for nearly 30 years, having mediated over 7,500 disputes throughout the US, primarily in Texas. Eric served as an adjunct professor at University of Texas School of Law for eight years and continues to serve as an adjunct faculty member at Pepperdine School of Law. He has published five books about mediation and travels nationwide teaching the course he developed entitled Restoring Civil Discourse in an Overheated Society. Eric also happens to be the father of TDM's very own Kaela Kovach-Galton.



Eric with his daughter, Kaela